

# Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu exports Ethiopian heart and sole



Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu grew up in Zenabwork, an impoverished borough of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Its residents were skilled artisans who could make shoes from old car tires and inner tubes, but had no jobs that earned regular money.

She saw resources from elsewhere in Ethiopia — such as coffee and leather — used by international companies to make consumer goods for sale in foreign markets. Alemu looked for a way to bring jobs to Zenabwork and to keep profits close to home. What Zenabwork needed was trade, she believed, not charity and aid.

“My driving passions,” Alemu said, “are sharing Ethiopian cultures with the world and finding exciting ways to keep these cultures vibrant and fully relevant.”

Her passion built SoleRebels, a footwear company she founded in 2004 with five employees and seed money from her family. The company handcrafts footwear with materials local to Zenabwork: Abyssinian hemp and koba. The products include modern variations on the traditional selate shoe, the ones made from car tires and familiar to her since childhood.

While many manufacturers were discovering [the benefits of “going green,”](#) the people of Zenabwork had long experience in recycling to get the most use out of the fewest resources. Alemu refers to

SoleRebels' "traditional zero-carbon methods" as the way her countrymen have been making shoes for centuries.



co-founder of SoleRebels, in 2011 (Courtesy photo)

At Alemu's company in Zenabwork today, 150 artisans craft SoleRebels' shoes. According to the company, it is the only footwear company on the planet to be certified by the World Fair Trade Organization. It pays its workers up to four times the minimum wage and provides them medical coverage and transportation.


With annual revenue of about \$15 million, SoleRebels is the first African consumer brand to open retail stores around the globe, with locations in 55 countries. One of its recently opened stores is in a high-end mall in the heart of Silicon Valley, where entrepreneurship thrives, in California.

What qualities has Alemu seen in successful entrepreneurs? "To me, very successful entrepreneurs have the ability not simply to come up with an idea," she said, "but to exquisitely execute that idea over and over and make it into a living, breathing reality. The best entrepreneurs literally seem to live their companies."

What about advice for those starting out in the entrepreneurial world? "I think the best companies and brands are built by entrepreneurs willing to self-fund their ideas," she said. "My advice would be to build your idea piece by piece and get real and honest traction in the market with that idea while retaining as much equity as you can."

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# Unlocking Opportunity for Women in Business

Justina Balankena is a small-business owner in Bomani, Tanzania, where she sells  lightbulbs, electrical tape and paintbrushes, as well as small, single-unit solar lights and energy-efficient cookstoves. (Courtesy of USAID)

As the YALI Network kicks off [#Africa4Her](#), we're looking at some of the biggest issues facing women in sub-Saharan Africa today. And the issues that hold back women — 50 percent of the population — hold back the countries they live in.

Nowhere is this so clear as in the economic sector. When it comes to fueling economic growth, studies have repeatedly shown that giving women economic opportunity is among the most powerful fuels that exist.

A report by global investment and banking firm Goldman Sachs found that bringing more women into the labor force has the potential to boost a country's per capita income by an average of 12 percent by 2030.

The same research showed that women use their earnings to buy goods and services that improve family and community welfare, which in turn creates further economic growth.

And yet worldwide, 70 percent of businesses owned by women have no access to financial services such as savings accounts and loans. Laws and cultural traditions limit the economic contributions women are able to make, whether by not allowing them to borrow startup money in their own names, by favoring male relatives in the ownership of capital, or by demeaning their opinions in male-dominated business environments.

We'll look at women in Africa who have taken on these obstacles and made strides toward a more inclusive business culture. We'll look at ways both men and women can address gender bias and unlock the potential for economic growth that women represent.

In the upcoming YALI Network Online Course "Paving the Way for Women Entrepreneurs," entrepreneur/executive E. Diane White gives practical tips on what women can do to ensure their voices are heard in the business world.

*How will you invest in women and girls? Go to [yali.state.gov/pledge](https://yali.state.gov/pledge) to make your pledge.*

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# [Ambassador Cathy Russell on #Africa4Her](#)

*Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 2nd at 13:30 UTC. Additional details below.*

U.S. Ambassador Cathy Russell Amb.   
Russell in a meeting with Wanjira Mathai, the Director, Partnerships for Women's Entrepreneurship in Renewables (wPOWER) at the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Kenya. (State Department Photo)

The United States invests in women and girls for many of the reasons we invest in young African leaders: it's the right thing to do, and it's the smart thing to do.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls. As President Obama [said in his trip to Kenya and Ethiopia last summer](#), countries won't get ahead unless they include and empower women and girls.

That's why every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls about how we can work together to help women and girls achieve their full potential.

In that past year alone, we've made some exciting progress to advance the status of women and girls. Here are just three of the main areas where we're focused on making a difference.

## **Education**

Last March, the President and First Lady announced Let Girls Learn, a U.S. government initiative that addresses a range of challenges that prevent adolescent girls from attending and completing school.

As part of Let Girls Learn, the United States supported a [Women in Science \(WiSci\) camp](#) in Rwanda last summer. For three weeks, 120 girls from nine countries learned valuable skills in science, technology, engineering, art and design, and mathematics (STEAM).

## Health and safety

Education is one way to help empower women and girls. But it takes a complete approach to get the job done—one that considers issues like health and safety, in addition to education. That's why the United States is also working with Tanzania and Malawi to support women and girls from several angles.

In addition to focusing on education, our efforts will also tackle gender-based violence and health challenges like HIV/AIDS. Malawi and Tanzania are [DREAMS](#) (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) countries, which means they are part of a partnership between the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Nike Foundation to tackle HIV/AIDS.

## Entrepreneurship

Financial independence can make an incredible difference for women and their communities. Women are more likely to invest their earnings back into their family, paying for things like their kids' education and immunizations. And when they own their own business, women are more likely to hire other women, so empowering women entrepreneurs has a multiplier effect within communities.

That's why we're focused on empowering women entrepreneurs. Over the past year, the United States has opened physical centers that offer resources to women entrepreneurs in Zambia and Kenya. And just last week I joined Kiva to launch the [Women's Entrepreneurship Fund](#), which will expand access to finance for women entrepreneurs in 84 countries.

The fact is that it will take all of us – men and women, boys and girls – to achieve the progress we need to help women and girls achieve their full potential. But if every one of us takes action, we can make real and lasting progress for gender equality.

You can help make this possible. [Take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

[Join the YALICHAT](#) on Wednesday, March 2 at:

*12:30-13:30 Cape Verde Time (CVT)*

*13:30-14:30 UTC/GMT*

*14:30-15:30 West Africa Time (WAT)*

*15:30-16:30 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)*

*18:30-19:30 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)*

*19:30-20:30 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)*

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# **The Women's Luncheon at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit**

## **What is the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit?**

It's the largest engagement a U.S. president has ever had with African leaders and governments. The [U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit](#) will bring together 50 heads of state, along with a range of U.S. and African civil society and business leaders, to discuss the future of Africa.

## **What issues will the Summit address?**

The summit leader sessions will focus on topics such as trade and investment, peace and regional stability, and good governance. The signature events will address issues such as civil society, women's empowerment, global health, resilience and food security, and wildlife trafficking.

## **What will happen at the women's empowerment event?**

During the *Investing in Women for Peace and Prosperity* signature event, [U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power](#) will host a panel discussion that will emphasize the importance of investing in women for peace and prosperity; highlight African governments' effort to promote gender equality; and reaffirm African and U.S. commitments to advancing gender equality.

## **Why is this issue important to young African leaders?**

African women's leadership and meaningful participation across sectors and generations are central to sustainable development in Africa. Women's participation — in government, the economy, and society — accelerates economic growth, improves health and education, advances democratic governance and fosters peace and security.

When women have the same opportunities and access to resources as do men, the benefits extend beyond women themselves. As women work to strengthen their families and communities, they foster the education and health of the next generation, hasten economic growth and strengthen public and private institutions.

And when women succeed, nations succeed. In countries where women are empowered to participate and to lead, society is safer, more secure and more prosperous. That's because women's participation in and leadership of public and private institutions make these institutions more representative and more effective.

The United States is committed to supporting the efforts of its African partners and young African leaders to expand women's and girls' access to health care, education, clean water and proper nutrition; and to promote women's full participation in society.

## **Photo credit: MCC**

## **What was the outcome of the Investing in Women, Peace and Prosperity Signature Event at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit?**

Jill Biden, wife of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, opened the "Investing in Women for Peace and Prosperity" signature event at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, where the United States committed new assistance to [advance women's empowerment](#) in Africa. The support will bolster women's participation in peace building and in parliamentary campaigns, assist in the

development or implementation of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, and help women entrepreneurs to launch or expand businesses.

The United States will provide technical support to strengthen African Union and national-level efforts to address barriers to the equal participation of women in the agricultural sector. Through [wPOWER](#) and working with the [Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves](#), it will provide grants to organizations that promote the role of women entrepreneurs in selling clean technologies and that scale-up programs to educate adolescent girls on clean-energy technologies. The United States also will provide increased assistance to the Inter-Parliamentary Union to build the capacity of African parliaments working to advance gender equality and to support parliamentary campaigns on specific gender-equality issues.

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